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FEBRUARY 19, 2004

CONTACT: GLENN BRIERE
(617) 727-6200, EXT. 123

**DeNUCCI FAULTS DSS FOR HIGH ERROR RATE
IN FOSTER CARE DATA TRACKING**

State Auditor Joe DeNucci reported today that the state Department of Social Services (DSS) had a 67 percent error rate in the \$50 million database system it uses to make key decisions on foster care providers, creating the risk that children could be placed and/or remain in unsafe homes.

DeNucci found the high error rate in a review of more than 4,000 foster care case records in the agency's computerized FamilyNet system, which DSS uses to conduct licensing, annual case reassessments and criminal background reviews of foster care providers. A prior DeNucci audit had also cited licensing and criminal background check weaknesses.

The errors included missing and inaccurate dates and overdue annual reassessments, including criminal background checks. One provider was approved without having any of the required reviews completed. The audit found more than 800 files that did not include a date indicating initial approval for child placement, while more than 1,300 files lacked the last reassessment date. Other files had incorrect dates for the next required reassessment and dates for reviews that were overdue. Also, more than 1,000 files were not included in the analysis because of insufficient information, such as blank initial and reassessment data.

"State government has no greater responsibility than protecting young and vulnerable children," said DeNucci. "With 10,000 kids living in foster or group homes, it is essential that DSS has updated and accurate information available to ensure that these children are placed in homes that are safe."

In discussions with DSS officials, DeNucci's staff was told that some of the discrepancies could be attributed to the fact that social workers maintain individual files and that reassessment information is not consistently updated on the agency's FamilyNet system. DSS has no central office review of information on FamilyNet.

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In a sample of Criminal Offense Record Information (CORI) checks required to reevaluate foster care providers, DeNucci's audit found that DSS did not perform timely reviews of criminal record data in 20 percent of the cases reviewed. In 12 percent of those cases, DSS placed children in homes without completing proper licensing requirements.

"The department should review this information on a regular basis so that discrepancies may be identified and corrected as quickly as possible," said DeNucci.

DSS officials replied that they agree with Auditor DeNucci's recommendation and said that they will have an improved reporting capability in place by March 2004.

In other areas, DeNucci directed DSS to strengthen its inventory controls, in accordance with the State Comptroller's regulations, to ensure that its property is adequately protected against possible loss, theft, or misuse. The auditor also advised the agency to comply with the Comptroller's regulations regarding the certification of its payroll expenditures.

DSS said it has taken steps to implement Auditor DeNucci's recommendations. The agency has also resolved a previously disclosed deficiency involving notifying its sub-recipients of federal grants that have been received.

"The Department of Social Services has made some improvements in these areas, and I anticipate continued progress," said DeNucci.